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ABSTRACT

As part of broader national effort, 510 Pennsylvania adults were randomly surveyed in order to examine their attitudes toward higher education. In addition, a focus group was held in suburban Philadelphia. The four major findings of the research are that Pennsylvanians believe: (1) higher education is vitally important for success; (2) the process of earning a degree is inherently valuable to building the character of students and is not merely a symbolic exercise; (3) the main responsibility for success in higher education rests with the student, but institutions should help students who exhibit strong effort; and (4) paying for college is difficult but doable. The Pennsylvania survey complements a national telephone survey of 1,015 adults. Analysis showed that Pennsylvanians' attitudes do not differ significantly from those of the nation's as a whole, except that Pennsylvanians feel that poorer students have an easier time than middle-income students attending a four-year college; Pennsylvanians also strongly support making student loans from the federal government available more often. Three tables present statewide and national response data; a final section describes the methodology. (RAB)

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS:

How Pennsylvanians View Higher Education

By John Immerwahr

A Report Prepared by Public Agenda

And Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

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Foreword

Great Expectations: How Pennsylvanians View Higher Education is part of a broader effort of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Public Agenda to stimulate a public discussion about the role of colleges and universities in maintaining and enhancing the opportunities for all Americans to participate fully in our society. This special survey complements a larger survey administered to the entire nation and released earlier this month, called *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education.* These reports are available in full at www.highereducation.org.

John Immerwahr, the author of both the national and Pennsylvania reports, has done a masterful job of explaining the most significant trends in public attitudes about higher education, and of illuminating the key similarities and differences between the views of Pennsylvanians and Americans. His findings are based on a national sample of over 1,000 adults and a state sample of over 500 Pennsylvanians. He also had the opportunity to discuss higher education issues with a group of citizens in Bala Cynwyd.

We would like to thank the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for sponsoring this special survey of Pennsylvanians' attitudes. We would also like to extend our appreciation to the organizations whose financial support made the national report possible: The Ford Foundation, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, and the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement.

Patrick M. Callan
President
National Center for Public Policy
and Higher Education

In early 2000, Public Agenda surveyed 510 Pennsylvanians statewide to examine their attitudes toward higher education. We also held a focus group in Bala Cynwyd, a suburb of Philadelphia. In many ways, the attitudes of Pennsylvanians regarding higher education are strikingly similar to the views of the nation as a whole, as revealed in our broader survey of public attitudes, *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education.* Four major conclusions emerged from our Pennsylvania research, which are also supported by what we found nationwide. In addition, the final section of this report describes a few areas where the attitudes of Pennsylvanians differ somewhat from those of Americans generally.

For the purposes of this research, we define *higher education* broadly to include all education and training beyond high school, including two- and four-year, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions.

Finding One:

PENNSYLVANIANS BELIEVE THAT HIGHER EDUCATION IS VITALLY IMPORTANT FOR SUCCESS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD.

Most people in Pennsylvania believe that a higher education is essential for a person to succeed in today's world. In effect, most Pennsylvania residents now see a college education as having replaced a high school diploma as the minimum entry ticket to a solid job and a middle-class lifestyle.

In the survey, we found:

- ★ 89% strongly or somewhat agree that a college degree has become as important as a high school diploma used to be.
- ★ Only 23% think that it is possible to reach a point where too many people have a college degree; most (73%) believe that this is one area where there can never be too much of a good thing.

As higher education is being seen as more important for success in today's economy and society, the public is also placing a premium on the significance of preserving access to higher education for anyone who is sufficiently qualified and motivated. In effect, Pennsylvanians see access to higher education as equivalent to access to the American dream. Specifically, Pennsylvanians do not want students to be excluded from a college education by cost alone. Seventy-four percent strongly agree that we should not allow the price of a college education to keep qualified and motivated students from going to college.

Finding Two:

HIGHER EDUCATION IS MORE THAN JUST A PIECE OF PAPER.

Pennsylvanians have high expectations for what they expect students to take away from a college education. We presented respondents with a list of factors and asked how important each was as a goal of a college education. The most important factor is that students gain a sense of maturity and learn how to manage on their own, with 72% saying that this is absolutely essential. An equally high percentage (70%) say that it is absolutely essential for students to learn how to get along with people different from themselves.

Although these general interpersonal skills top the list, there are a number of other skills that are rated as absolutely essential by Pennsylvanians, such as learning to solve problems and think analytically (63%), learning specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they have chosen (63%), learning high-tech skills (62%), and gaining top-notch writing and speaking skills (57%).

The Pennsylvania public also has high expectations for the administrators who run local colleges and universities. Sixty-eight percent say it is absolutely essential for colleges to hire good teachers and researchers, and 60% stress that colleges should ensure that students work hard to achieve high academic standards.

The majority of people in the state value the education that a student receives in college, not just the piece of paper. Fifty-two percent believe that college graduates get higher salaries because having a college degree means someone has skills and accomplishments, as opposed to 43% who think that employers just get impressed by a degree.

The public has high expectations, but they also seem to be pleased with the job Pennsylvania's public and private colleges and universities are doing, especially as compared to the performance of the state's high schools. Fifty-six percent give the state's colleges an excellent or a good rating, as opposed to only 39% who give state high schools a good or excellent rating.

Finding Three:

PENNSYLVANIANS BELIEVE THAT THE MAIN RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESTS WITH THE STUDENT, BUT THEY ALSO EXPECT INSTITUTIONS TO HELP THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES.

The Pennsylvania public sees a higher education not as an entitlement, but as something students should have to work for, and the notion of a free higher education is not attractive to very many state residents. Seventy-seven percent strongly or somewhat agree that students only appreciate the value of an education when they have some personal responsibility for paying what it costs.

By the same token, Pennsylvania residents feel that what a student gets out of a college education is largely a result of the amount of effort the student puts in. We asked our Pennsylvania respondents whether the benefits of a higher education depend more on how much effort the student puts in or on the quality of the college. The overwhelming majority (88%) said that effort was the key.

Pennsylvanians also put the responsibility for success in college on the student. Seventy-one percent say that when a student falls behind, it is primarily the responsibility of the student—rather than the college—to get back on track. This does not mean that colleges have no responsibility; 72% percent also agree that colleges should provide advisors and counselors for students who fall behind, rather than take more severe approaches.

When it comes to thinking about financial aid, Pennsylvanians continue to emphasize individual effort, believing that aid should go first to students who work hard. Eighty-eight percent say that they would prefer to give financial aid to a student with average skills who works hard in school, rather than to a student with excellent skills who does not work hard.

Finding Four:

PAYING FOR COLLEGE IS DIFFICULT BUT DOABLE.

College is perceived as expensive, and 60% of Pennsylvania residents agree that families are not doing a good job saving for college. Pennsylvanians are divided on whether there are many qualified people who are currently unable to attend college. Fifty percent feel that there are many people who are qualified to go to college but do not have an opportunity to do so, as compared to 43% who say that the vast majority of those who are qualified have the opportunity to do so.

But the majority of Pennsylvanians are convinced that where there is a will, there is a way. Ninety-one percent either strongly (63%) or somewhat (28%) agree that people who really want to go to college can find a way to pay for it even if they have to go to school and work at the same time.

Pennsylvanians also support a broad range of financial aid proposals, with 80% thinking that the government should offer more tax breaks and credits for students, 73% favoring more funds for work-study and 65% favoring more money for loans. Direct grants to students were somewhat less popular; only 50% favored more money for grants.

PENNSYLVANIA AND THE NATION AT LARGE

In many of the areas we have discussed so far, the attitudes of Pennsylvanians are not significantly different from those of the nation as a whole. But there are a few areas where the attitudes of Pennsylvanians differ somewhat from those of the nation.

One area deals with the question of who has the hardest time attending a four-year college: a low-income student (who may be able to qualify for financial aid), or a middle-class student (who may not qualify for financial aid because of his or her family's higher income). Nationwide, a plurality (48%) think that the middle-class person has an easier time, as opposed to 43% who think things are easier for the poorer person. In Pennsylvania, however, the views are reversed. Forty-nine percent think things will be easier for the low-income student, while only 42% think the middle-class student will find it easier. As one woman in our Bala Cynwyd focus group put it: "I think the lower income person has it easier. There's so many things for low income. There are programs out there where you can get money for your books and for transportation. If you're middle income, you're not gonna have the extra income to buy those books."

In another finding that may be related, Pennsylvanians are more likely to support making money available for student loans, with 65% saying that the federal government should use loans more often, higher than the 57% of the nation as a whole who feel this way. Our hypothesis is that these differences may be driven by the fact that Pennsylvania is, relatively speaking, a state where higher education is more expensive than in many other states. Pennsylvanians appear to be feeling the pinch, and thus may be more likely to be concerned about the ability of middle-class families to afford education for their children.

Supporting Tables

Table One

Satisfaction with High Schools and Colleges

Are the [INSERT ITEM] in your state doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job, or don't you know enough to say?

% responding	*National*	*Pennsylvania*
Public High Schools		
Excellent	6	8
Good	27	31
Fair	28	25
Poor	13	12
Don't know	25	24
Colleges		
Excellent	15	19
Good	42	37
Fair	13	12
Poor	3	2
Don't know	28	31
Four-Year Colleges		
Excellent	15	18
Good	40	37
Fair	10	13
Poor	2	1
Don't know	33	31
Two-Year Colleges		
Excellent	14	15
Good	36	37
Fair	14	13
Poor	2	2
Don't know	34	33

n = U.S.: 1,015 general public; Pennsylvania: 510 general public.

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Table Two

Attitudes toward Higher Education

% responding	National	Pennsylvania
We should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so		
Strongly agree	78	74
Somewhat agree	15	19
Somewhat disagree	3	5
Strongly disagree	2	1
A college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be		
Strongly agree	68	69
Somewhat agree	19	20
Somewhat disagree	8	9
Strongly disagree	4	7
If someone really wants to go to college, they can find a way to pay for it, even if they have to go to school and work at the same time		
Strongly agree	63	63
Somewhat agree	24	28
Somewhat disagree	8	5
Strongly disagree	5	4
Today's colleges should be doing a much better job of keeping their costs down		
Strongly agree	60	63
Somewhat agree	23	25
Somewhat disagree	7	6
Strongly disagree	4	3
Students have to borrow too much money to pay for their college education		
Strongly agree	56	52
Somewhat agree	24	28
Somewhat disagree	11	12
Strongly disagree	4	4
Students appreciate the value of a college education only when they have some personal responsibility for paying what it costs		
Strongly agree	47	52
Somewhat agree	27	26
Somewhat disagree	16	15
Strongly disagree	8	5
Almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get loans or financial aid		
Strongly agree	33	35
Somewhat agree	29	34
Somewhat disagree	17	14
Strongly disagree	15	11
There are too many students in college who don't belong there		
Strongly agree	27	32
Somewhat agree	22	21
Somewhat disagree	22	21
Strongly disagree	18	15
Most families today do a good job of saving for their children's college education		
Strongly agree	10	10
Somewhat agree	18	23
Somewhat disagree	33	34
Strongly disagree	32	26

n = U.S.: 1,015 general public; Pennsylvania: 510 general public.

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Table Three

What Should a Student Gain from College?

How important is each of the following in terms of what students should gain from attending college? [INSERT ITEM] Is that absolutely essential, important but not essential or not too important?

% responding	National	Pennsylvania
A sense of maturity and how to manage on their own		
Absolutely essential	71	72
Important but not essential	26	25
Not too important	2	3
An ability to get along with people different from themselves		
Absolutely essential	68	70
Important but not essential	29	27
Not too important	2	2
An improved ability to solve problems and to think analytically		
Absolutely essential	63	63
Important but not essential	34	34
Not too important	1	2
Learning high-tech skills, such as using computers and the Internet		
Absolutely essential	61	62
Important but not essential	35	34
Not too important	4	3
Specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they have chosen		
Absolutely essential	60	63
Important but not essential	35	33
Not too important	4	3
Top-notch writing and speaking skills		
Absolutely essential	57	57
Important but not essential	38	40
Not too important	4	3
The responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and volunteering		
Absolutely essential	44	44
Important but not essential	47	47
Not too important	9	9
Exposure to great writers and thinkers in subjects like literature and history		
Absolutely essential	32	30
Important but not essential	53	58
Not too important	14	11

n = U.S.: 1,015 general public; Pennsylvania: 510 general public.

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Methodology

This report is based on a telephone survey of 510 adults aged 18 years or older who reside in Pennsylvania. It complements a national telephone survey of 1,015 adults. The interviews with Pennsylvania residents were conducted in January 2000 and averaged 28 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted using a random sample of households in Pennsylvania and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the region covered had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for the 510 randomly selected Pennsylvania adults is +/– 4 percentage points.

The questionnaire was designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

About the Author

John Immerwahr is a Senior Research Fellow at Public Agenda and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Villanova University. He has written several previous Public Agenda reports on higher education, including *Doing Comparatively Well: Why the Public Loves Higher Education and Criticizes K–12* (1999); *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education* (1998); *Preserving the Higher Education Legacy: A Conversation with California Leaders* (1995); and *The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System* (1993). In addition, he has authored and co-authored a number of other Public Agenda reports on education, including the groundbreaking national study, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994) and, for the 1996 National Education Summit of the nation's governors and business leaders, *Americans' Views on Standards: An Assessment by Public Agenda* (1996). Other state-specific studies written by Dr. Immerwahr include *What Our Children Need: South Carolinians Look at Public Education* (1996) and *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education* (1993).

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98-1 *Concept Paper: A National Center to Address Higher Education Policy*, by Patrick M. Callan (March 1998). Describes the purposes of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

98-2 *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr (Spring 1998). A national survey of Americans' views on higher education, conducted and reported by Public Agenda.

98-3 *Organizing for Learning: The View from the Governor's Office*, by James B. Hunt Jr., Governor of North Carolina and Chair of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (June 1998). An address to the American Association for Higher Education concerning opportunity in higher education.

98-4 *Tidal Wave II Revisited: A Review of Earlier Enrollment Projections for California Higher Education*, by Gerald C. Hayward, David W. Breneman and Leobardo F. Estrada (September 1998). Finds that earlier forecasts of a surge in higher education enrollments were accurate.

98-5 *The Challenges Facing California Higher Education: A Memorandum to the Next Governor of California*, by David W. Breneman (September 1998). Concludes that the next governor should give serious consideration to exploring a new Master Plan for Higher Education.

98-6 *Federal Tuition Tax Credits and State Higher Education Policy: A Guide for State Policy Makers*, by Kristin D. Conklin (December 1998). Examines the implications of the new federal income tax provisions on students and their families, and makes recommendations for state higher education policy.

98-7 *Higher Education Governance: Balancing Institutional and Market Influences*, by Richard C. Richardson, Jr., Kathy Reeves Bracco, Patrick M. Callan, and Joni E. Finney (November 1998). Describes the structural relationships that affect institutional efficacy in higher education, and argues that effective state policy achieves a balance between institutional and market forces.

98-8 *The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Higher Education: An Agenda for Policy Research*, by Dennis Jones, Peter Ewell, and Aims McGuinness (December 1998). Argues that due to substantial changes in the landscape of postsecondary education, new state-level policy frameworks must be developed and implemented.

99-1 *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr (January 1999). Reports the views of those most involved with decision-making about higher education, based on a survey and focus groups conducted by Public Agenda.

99-2 *South Dakota: Developing Policy-Driven Change in Higher Education*, by Mario Martinez (June 1999). Describes the processes for change in higher education that government, business and higher education leaders are creating and implementing in South Dakota.

99-3 *State Spending for Higher Education in the Next Decade: The Battle to Sustain Current Support*, by Harold A. Hovey (July 1999). This fiscal forecast of state and local spending patterns finds that the vast majority of states will face significant fiscal deficits over the next eight years, which will in turn lead to increased scrutiny of higher education in almost all states, and to curtailed spending for public higher education in many states.

00-1 *A State-by-State Report Card on Higher Education: Prospectus* (March 2000). The National Center is developing a state-by-state report card that compares and evaluates each state's performance in higher education. The goal of the report card is to stimulate the creation of state policies that enhance opportunity and achievement in higher education.

00-2 *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno (May 2000). This report by Public Agenda finds that Americans overwhelmingly see higher education as essential for economic mobility; parents overwhelmingly believe that their children must go to college; and African American and Hispanic parents value higher education especially highly. The report is based on the most extensive survey ever conducted on public views about higher education.

00-2b *Great Expectations: How Pennsylvanians View Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr (May 2000). This report by Public Agenda compares Pennsylvanians' views on higher education to those of Americans generally.

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